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ABSTRACT

A project was developed to combat the negative stereotypes of ageism, and to provide positive role models of older adults for young children. Funded with a grant of $750, an Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center was established. Two major Center activities were (1) the selection, purchase, and organization into a lending program of 65 books for young children, which portray older adults in non-stereotyped roles: and (2) the development of a program in which older adults served as volunteer resource persons in early childhood classrooms and young children visited the elderly in nursing and retirement homes. A third related aspect of the project was the development of a file of community older adults who were willing to serve as early childhood program resources. This project has taught its initiators that recruitment, orientation, and on-going liaison with volunteers are extremely time-consuming operations. Two successful aspects of the project were: (1) several elderly men and women effectively conducted classroom activities and worked at publicity booth displays: and (2) carefully prepared children visited hospitalized elderly persons on a continuing, biweekly basis. Recommendations for replicating the project are included. (Author/RH)

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YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE MY GRANDPARENT TO BE MY GOOD FRIEND...

This paper summarizes a presentation at the November 1979 NAEYC national conference in Atlanta, Georgia. This was one of four talks by panel members relating to the Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center for Early Childhood Education in Binghamton, New York.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of human aging is relatively new. Modern scientific technology has provided both a lowered infant mortality and an increased life span. Prior to the advances of modern medicine, few people lived past the years now regarded as young middle-age. The proportion of persons over age 65 in the United States population has grown from 4% in 1900 to approximately 10% in the late 1970's. Concurrent with this increase of older Americans, we have experienced massive changes in the social and institutional fabric of our society. Within the pattern of nuclear family mobility, American families, young ones, are on the move -- many older adults tend to stay behind. Even though families may stay in touch through the modern miracles of long distance telephone and jet plane travel, many young children lack the degree of frequent or daily contact with older adults, especially grandparents, which older generations may have experienced in childhood. Today's mid-life adults may remember childhood visits among extended family members, shared special occasions and family holiday celebrations, and exchange of supportive roles among family members of varied ages. Such opportunities to learn first-hand about human relations across the generations come infrequently, if at all, for many of today's young children. In FUTURE SHOCK Alvin Toffler described the emergence of the "streamlined family". (Since this book was published a decade ago, the streamlined family has become, frequently, even more so -- often today's family is one parent and one child.) Let us consider Toffler's description.

> "The typical pre-industrial family not only had a good many children, but numerous other dependents as well -- grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. Such 'extended' families were well suited for survival in slow-paced agricultural societies. But such families are hard to transport or transplant. They are immobile.
>
> "Industrialism demanded masses of workers ready and able to move off the land in pursuit of jobs, and to move again whenever necessary. Thus the extended family gradually shed its

> excess weight and the so-called 'nuclear' family emerged -- a stripped-down, portable family unit consisting only of parents and a small set of children. This new style family, far more mobile than the traditional extended family, became the standard model in all the industrial countries." (Toffler, 1970, p. 206)

The "excess weight" shed by the nuclear family included, of course, those great-aunts, great-uncles, and grandparents who did not move with the young family. Demographic data tell us that 27% of adults over age 65 now live alone: some maintain their own homes; many have moved into retirement complexes and high-rise apartments which are age-segregated; only 5% are institutionalized in nursing homes and extended care facilities.

Let us consider what separation of the old from the young in daily living means for our children. We first recall the description of close inter-generational relations which some children of former years experienced. Margaret Mead referred with much affection to the role of her paternal grandmother during Mead's childhood:

> "I thing it was my grandmother who gave me my ease in being a woman ... the strength of my conscience came from Grandma, who meant what she said. Perhaps nothing is more valuable for a child than living with an adult who is firm and loving -- and Grandma was loving." (Mead, 1972, p.56)

Mead also writes that "...the closest friends I have made all through life have been people who also grew up close to a loved and loving grandmother or grandfather." (Mead, 1972, p.58)

In present-day America where youth is exalted and old age is devalued, few young children experience frequent interchange of any kind with an older person, loving or not. What is lost in socialization, in the passing of human values and personal history, in experiencing a diversity of humanity? What does this lack of contact entail for formation of concepts about old people, old age, and the process of human aging? What images of old age

do our young children hold in their minds? Do those mythical witches, crones, and ogres of literary fantasy carry over into the attitudes which are developed toward real old people? In research exploring the attitudes of young children toward old age and aging, several recent studies have contributed to our understanding of this topic (Chappell, 1977; Click and Powell, 1976; Hickey, Hickey, & Kalish, 1968; and Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper, & Serock, 1977). On a personal level two anecdotes may serve to illustrate the attitudes of preschool children:

> I. The preschool teacher and one four-year-old girl were in the early childhood classroom on a golden afternoon in October. In the doorway across the room there appeared a very old woman. She was well-dressed, indeed, somewhat "loudly" dressed in very bright colors. She wore gloves, a hat, and carried a purse. Her short gray hair protruded rather busily around the rim of her hat. Her face, deeply lined with wrinkles, was heavily made up with powder, rouge, and bright red lipstick.
>
> When the old woman appeared, the young child looked in her direction, and then piped out in piercing tones this comment:
>
> "YOU LOOK JUST LIKE A WITCH!"
>
> (Fortunately for the teacher's peace of mind, the elderly visitor had come from Europe to visit, and thus understood practically no English!)

The second anecdote comes from Bear Mountain State Park in New York:

> II. A young woman and her three-year-old niece were walking along a mountain path. As they strolled leisurely through the autumn scene, there approached an ancient Black man, walking haltingly toward them. After they had passed the man, the little girl inquired of her aunt,
>
> "Is that what color you turn when you get old?"

When we consider the young child's continuous attempt to "make sense" of the world around him/her, we adults need to be sensitive to the images of aging and old age which are contributing to the process of concept formation.

Negative stereotypes of old age portrayed in children's literature have received attention in a number of recent studies (Ansello, 1976, 1977, 1978: Barnum, 1977; and Robin, 1977).

The need to provide positive views of human aging for young children has motivated the development of the project which is described in this paper.

THE PROJECT MODEL

In an attempt to combat the negative stereotypes of ageism, and to provide positive role models of older adults for young children, the Binghamton, New York, Association for Education of Young Children submitted a proposal to NAEYC for a 1978-79 Membership Action Grant. Funded with a grant of $750, the BAEYC Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center was established. Two major aspects of the project were: (1) the selection, purchase, and organization into a lending program of 65 books for young children, which portray older adults in non-stereotyped roles; and (2) the development of an exchange program of experiences between young children and older adults (McDuffie, 1979). These exchanges occurred as older adults served as volunteer resource persons in early childhood classrooms, and as young children carried group experiences to settings for the elderly in nursing homes and retirement homes.

A third related aspect of the project was the development of a file of community older adults who were willing to serve as early childhood program resources. A procedure for initial contact of the individual volunteer by the teacher, and for follow-up evaluation was included in the project design. BAEYC members were asked to serve as personal recruiters of older volunteers. The project coordinator contacted numerous individuals and agencies in the field of aging. Publicity for the project was obtained through newspaper stories, newsletters of various agencies serving the elderly, and through television.

Additional aspects of the project included the purchase and loan of several adult books on aging, and several audio-visual presentations which could be used in teacher training. Several collections of historical photographs and life-sequence photographs were available for loan. The development of "history kits" of old clothing, old kitchen and household utensils, and other artifacts was begun.

BOOKS/MATERIALS LENDING PROGRAM

Of the $750 grant, approximately $550 was spent on children's books, adult books, photo kits, and audio-visual aids. These books and materials are located in the Gathering Place, an early childhood educational resource center operated cooperatively by several community groups. Materials and books are available for one-month loan, without charge, to parents, early childhood teachers, and day care staff. The project coordinator organized and initiated the purchase and processing of loan materials. Administration of day-to-day operations has been supervised by the resource center director, and by a CETA older adult worker assigned specifically to this project for twenty hours per week.

In order to encourage circulation of the materials, a small collection of children's books has been taken to monthly BAEYC meetings, to be signed out on loan.

OLDER ADULTS AS RESOURCE PERSONS

A file of older adults within the community who were willing to volunteer as resource persons in early childhood programs was developed. In recruiting older adults, the following activities were listed as a partial list of suggestions for their interaction with young children:

> Read a story to a group or to one child.
>
> Show a group of children how to knit or crochet, and talk with them about the clothes which people wore when you were a child. If you have any clothes from "old-times" (and even the 1930's and 1940's are old times to little children), bring them along to show.

Help several children do simple carpentry with wood scraps and tools or glue.

Help children cook. Make pancakes or applesauce or cookies or oatmeal or soup or whatever, talking with them about your own childhood experiences with food. You can include your recollections of growing food, harvesting and storing food, preparing food, special family celebrations and related food -- any of these.

Bring in photographs of yourself at various times of your life, or bring photos of your children at various ages. Showing these photos and talking with young children about the changes which occur over the length of a human life span can help them begin to understand concepts of time, growth, and change.

Share your memories of holiday observances as a child.

Share your memories of childhood activities, your favorite games and toys, your interactions with family and friends.

Show historical photos and discuss with children the changes in lifestyle which you have experienced during your life. Changes in communication, transportation, housing, and community living might be discussed and compared with the lifestyle of today's children.

This project has taught its initiators that recruitment, orientation, and on-going liason with volunteers are extremely time-consuming operations. If the coordinator's role had been a paid position, much more time could have been devoted to the project and consequently, more progress could have been made. However, a number of successful experiences evolved through the project. Two of them will be described below:

Older adults in a public kindergarten

In a large kindergarten class two males, each over 65 years of age, neither ever having been a parent, came once each week to do carpentry projects with the children. One of the men designed and prepared materials in his home for these projects. In this same kindergarten a retired music teacher, aged 75, demonstrated her collection of antique mechanical banks. An 88-year-old Black man cooked a Chinese meal in the kindergarten classroom. The "Pumpkin Lady", aged 62, attired in her bright orange pumpkin smock, helped children carve their Halloween jack-o-lanterns.

Several of these same volunteers also worked long hours at a local shopping

mall during the 1979 display for the Week of the Young Child. It must be recorded that the success of this kindergarten program related directly to the high degree of dynamic enthusiasm and cooperation provided by the leadership of the classroom teacher.

Children's visitation to older adults

One proprietary day care center developed a unique response to the intergenerational project. Because labor regulations prohibited older volunteers' working within the proprietary center, the director searched for some other means of providing contact between the generations. Meetings were held between day care staff and the activities director of the extended care facility at a nearby teaching hospital. After careful preparation of the teachers, the children, and their parents, a series of regular visits by children to the ECF was begun. These visits to hospitalized elderly have continued on a bi-weekly basis. The continuity provided by these regularly scheduled visits makes it possible for long-range relationships to be established. Staff members of the two cooperating units maintain frequent communication regarding the visitation program.

Although the older adults in this particular activity are frail and ill elderly, the children (through careful advance preparation by sensitive teachers) learn to meet these old people as people, rather than as stereotypes. It is the philosophy of the Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center that this carefully supervised, educationally integrated experience with old people will help these young children to develop realistic understanding of the human life span, as well as compassion and empathy for others. The children will come to understand that some old people do get sick and weak, and that we can help them by visiting, sharing small gifts, and spending time with them. Teachers should strive, however, to provide a balance of contacts with additional older adults, active and vital and fully engaged in the process of on-going life.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPLICATION OF THIS MODEL

The most important recommendation for any community wishing to replicate this project model is to provide resources for a paid project coordinator. Initial recruitment of older adult volunteers was more difficult than had been anticipated: the time-consuming contacts through organizations and individuals required much follow-up. Orientation of volunteers regarding the specific programs which they would visit, orientation of early childhood staff members regarding the role expectations for the older volunteers, and follow-up evaluation of the experience from viewpoints of both the teacher and the volunteer are all time-consuming responsibilities of the project coordinator.

Older adults were sometimes hesitant when first approached regarding their availability as resource persons -- some stated that they had nothing to contribute. The project coordinator should be sensitive to such reluctance, and try to gain understanding of whether the older adult really does not want contact with young children (some do not!), or whether a bit more encouragement and persuasion are called for.

The importance of establishing community links between agencies for the elderly and programs for young children must be stressed. Other important links are those which can provide publicity for the project through newspaper contacts and media coverage. Contact between the young and the old is a real "human relations" item; often excellent coverage can be obtained if the proper contacts for publicity are established and maintained.

SUMMARY

The BAEYC Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center in Binghamton, New York, was established as one model through which myths and stereotypes of ageism might be counteracted in early childhood education. This model could be replicated and expanded by early childhood groups in most communities. It is suggested that the position of coordinator be a salaried, at least half-

time position in order to facilitate development of community links and the recruitment/placement of older volunteers.

Our initial positive experiences within this project have reinforced our belief that intergenerational exchanges -- of shared activities, of enthusiasm, of warmth and concern, of self -- can provide satisfying human enrichment in the lives of both young children and adults.

Note: An outgrowth of the Intergenerational Teaching Resource Center has been a community committee on intergenerational day care, leading to a six-month pilot program linking several preschool programs in on-going activities with several facilities serving the elderly. This pilot program will be carried out during the spring of 1980.

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